

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 16, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C., 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express our concerns regarding the ongoing suspension of consular services at Embassy Baghdad. We are troubled that this suspension, which has been in place since January 1, 2020, has resulted in a tremendous case backlog and, in some instances, has prolonged the separation of American families and forced them to make harrowing choices. The suspension has also prolonged risk for thousands of Iraqis potentially eligible to immigrate to the United States who worked with U.S. diplomats or military personnel and remain subject to consistent threats and violence by extremist groups in Iraq. We urge the Department to urgently finalize and communicate to Congress a plan to work through the visa backlog generated by Embassy Baghdad's suspension, address remaining physical facilities upgrades to the Embassy compound, and resume consular operations in Baghdad in a manner that ensures Embassy personnel's safety.

As you know, the Department's consular services personnel issue passports and other documentation and services to American citizens, facilitate the issuance of visas for both immigrant and non-immigrant travel to the United States, and much more. In Fiscal Year 2019, the Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs issued 59,904 emergency passports overseas, assisted the families of 11,911 U.S. citizens who died while overseas and repatriated 1,209 U.S. citizens.¹ These services are vital in any country, but are especially critical in Iraq on account of its security challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy Baghdad suspended public consular services indefinitely on December 31, 2019 due to damage caused by attacks on the facility. While U.S. Consulate General Erbil remains operational, it is only able to offer emergency consular services. Thus, there is a growing backlog of routine consular service cases—some of which predate the COVID-19 pandemic—and there are major barriers for those who cannot travel to Erbil safely or cannot access attorneys to facilitate transfers to another embassy. Worse yet, for those who risked their lives – and that of their families – working alongside U.S. diplomats and military personnel in Iraq, the more than year-long visa processing suspension presents particular dangers as they seek to pursue a safe future in the United States. Iraqis known to have worked for or with the U.S. regularly report intimidation, threats to their lives and that of their families, as well as kidnapping, extortion, and targeted killings. As of this April, over 106,000 Iraqis that qualify for the P2 Direct Access Program (DAP) due to their work for the U.S. remain in processing without final determinations on visa status or resettlement.

¹ <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/travel/CA-By-the-Number-2020.pdf>

We believe the safety of Embassy personnel is of the utmost importance and share your objective to avoid any operational changes that the Department believes would endanger personnel's health or safety. We do, however, believe the Department should move forward with plans to address any physical facilities upgrades or revisions, and surge capacity to work through the growing visa processing case backlog expeditiously. The absence of a fully staffed and fully operational Embassy Baghdad, including with respect to consular services, has major implications for our constituents, especially for those of us who represent large Iraqi American communities. Constituents with loved ones in Iraq are forced to contemplate remaining separated indefinitely or traveling to Iraq to reunite despite the United States government's travel advisories in place. No American family should be put in this position.

We thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



ANDY LEVIN
Member of Congress

GREGORY W. MEEKS
Chair
House Foreign Affairs Committee

SARA JACOBS
Member of Congress

KATHY MANNING
Member of Congress

ILHAN OMAR
Member of Congress

COLIN ALLRED
Member of Congress

BRENDA L. LAWRENCE
Member of Congress

TED DEUTCH
Chair
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North
Africa, and Global Counterterrorism

JOAQUIN CASTRO
Member of Congress

TOM MALINOWSKI
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SETH MOULTON
Member of Congress

JASON CROW
Member of Congress